

Is Syria Bluffing or Preparing for a Massive Strike Against Israel?

Is Damascus counting down to the moment when it will launch a massive attack against the state of Israel using “strategic” weapons that could include weapons of mass destruction? That’s what Syrian President Bashar Assad appears to be signaling. The question is whether this is a bluff or the prelude to all-out war with Israel.

My sense at the moment is that it’s a bluff. Assad is steadily losing ground in his battle with the radical Islamic rebels trying to take over Syria. He’s also losing ground in the court of international public opinion. It’s not surprising that he would want to talk tough at such a moment.

That said, the Russians appear to be selling Syria highly sophisticated missile systems and other types of weaponry. Indeed, Damascus has requested 20 million rounds of ammunition. Iran and Hezbollah are working around the clock to strengthen Assad’s hand. Not surprisingly, then, the Israeli military is on high alert. Its defense minister is threatening to launch a preemptive strike against these state-of-the-art Russian missiles to keep them from becoming operational. And Israel’s homeland defense agency has been running nationwide drills to get people ready for the possibility of a missile attack from Syria, not unlike the one I write about fictionally in *Damascus Countdown*.

“Syrian President Bashar Assad said in an interview broadcast Thursday that he is ‘confident in victory’ in his country’s civil war, and he warned that Damascus would retaliate for any future Israeli airstrike on his territory,” reports the Associated Press, based on a TV interview on the Al-Manar

network. "Assad also told the Lebanese TV station Al-Manar that Russia has fulfilled some of its weapons contracts recently, but he was vague on whether this included advanced S-300 air defense systems."

"The comments were in line with a forceful and confident message the regime has been sending in recent days, even as the international community attempts to launch a peace conference in Geneva, possibly next month," the AP notes. "The strong tone coincided with recent military victories in battles with armed rebels trying to topple him."

"Taking a tough line, he also warned that Syria would strike back hard against any future Israeli airstrike," AP reports. "Earlier this month, Israel had struck near Damascus, targeting suspected shipments of advanced weapons purportedly intended for Hezbollah. Syria did not respond at the time. Assad said he has informed other countries that Syria would respond next time. 'If we are going to retaliate against Israel, this retaliation should be a strategic response,' he said."

In the article, the news service noted that "earlier this week, Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon said Israel considered the S-300s in Syrian hands a threat and signaled it was prepared to use force to stop delivery. Israel had no comment Thursday. The S-300s have a range of up to 200 kilometers (125 miles) and can track and strike multiple targets at once. Syria already possesses Russian-made air defenses. The U.S. and Israel had urged Russia to cancel the sale, but Russia rejected the appeals."

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